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A Strategic Planning Guide:
From Resources to Results for Young Children and Their Families

Ericka Tullis, Carol Sutherland, Kimberly Uyeda, Neal Halfon

NATIONAL CENTER FOR INFANT AND EARLY CHILDHOOD HEALTH POLICY

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Overview

The Maternal and Child Health Bureau (MCHB) launched the State Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (SECCS) Initiative to promote the healthy development and school readiness of young children. The initiative is an opportunity to plan and implement state systems that improve service system integration, quality, and availability. The initiative is built on years of research and practice regarding the effects of early childhood development on later life outcomes. Grantees will bring together multiple service sectors to address their common interest in improving healthy development and school readiness. MCH is well prepared to lead or provide support because of its existing efforts in integrated and coordinated service delivery, collaboration, and data collection.

SECCS provides two years of funding to grantees for planning and emphasizes:

- Building partnerships and connections with five key service sectors (health care, mental/socio-emotional health, early education and child care, parenting education, family support);
- Leveraging available existing resources; and
- Enhancing accountability through monitoring and evaluation activities addressing outcomes and process.

MCH agencies are well versed in strategic planning and implementation. However, SECCS may be broader in scope and entail a broader set of partnerships than state MCH agencies may be accustomed to.

Many different service sectors already dedicate resources to supporting the healthy development of young children. The growing recognition of the importance of investments in early childhood (i.e., school readiness, academic achievement, workforce preparation), make this opportunity both challenging and critically important. An effective, efficient, and collaborative planning process will be needed to assure the desired outcomes.

From Resources to Results is a planning tool designed to assist states in conducting strategic planning throughout the initiative. This tool addresses the initiative's underlying goals, and is based on several underlying assumptions:

- The SECCS planning process, although funded for two years, is a *long-term*, *iterative* focus on continuing *quality improvement*.
- States will build bridges across the five key sectors, not simply enhance existing silos.
- SECCS will focus on *integration* and *quality improvement*, and not simply provision of additional services.
- SECCS is *comprehensive* and *universal* in its application.
- *Prioritization* at each step in the process must identify short- and long-term outcomes.
- *Data is valuable* in monitoring priorities and assuring accountability, but data availability should not limit priorities.

From Resources to Results is organized into seven steps as summarized in this brief. The complete tool leads participants through each step at three levels of intensity for each component, and offers links to other valuable planning resources.

Vision, Mission, and Guiding Principles

Creating a vision, mission, and guiding principles helps clarify values and build consensus. Bridging concepts and principles can help forge cross-sector collaboration and help align activities that support the vision. Building consensus with partners and participants in SECCS is especially important

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as their diversity can mask their shared outcomes.

Inclusion, Public Input, and Communication

The intent of SECCS is to build and support sustained collaboration at the state, county, and community levels. SECCS should include broad participation from different service sectors and different levels of service—including family advocates and parents themselves.

Groups not traditionally involved with state-level planning can help to identify gaps in services, difficulties apparent from the parent perspective, and prospective resources. These groups can help stimulate early childhood system redesign and contribute improvement strategies. Non-traditional partners might include private businesses and organizations that can share their skills and provide cross-sector leadership.

Strength and Needs Assessments

As a starting point for planning, it is important to understand both early childhood needs and capacities. Fortunately, MCH and other human service organizations are usually very familiar with needs assessment.

New methods of assessing and conveying community needs and assets help guide prioritization, strategy selection, and resource allocation. "Critical pathways" work backward from an outcome to determine the conditions needed to achieve desired results. Strategies help bring about these conditions, and performance measures track the progress of strategies. Technology has improved the visual mapping of geographic areas—linking the availability and impact of services and the needs of young children and families.

Results Accountability Framework

A results accountability framework can help to ensure an effective planning process. Planning is guided by the desired results and measurement, monitoring and evaluation are important parts of the process. Results accountability frameworks keep planning focused on outcomes for children and families while maintaining an appropriate emphasis on the process. There will be a distinction between the desired results for the planning process and the implementation part of the initiative. By focusing on results, planners and implementers can clearly state the necessary methods, allocations and strategies.

Identification of Strategies

As with any initiative, it is important to choose the most appropriate strategies that will lead to the chosen results. Many different strategies will build the capacity of MCH and its partners to launch and sustain effective systems. These strategies will involve communication, leadership development, professional training, partnering and collaboration, policymaking, financing, and quality improvement.

Strategies should be classified and prioritized as those that can be implemented in the short- and long-term. The other steps in the strategic planning process will help inform prioritization (e.g., strength and needs assessment, allocations, etc.)

Allocation of Resources

Adequate ongoing and sustainable funding is a continuing challenge for any new initiative. Designing an integrated and comprehensive system is difficult, and sustainable funding is even more challenging. Financing strategies outlined in this section and a full report in this series should be considered. These include identifying the best use of existing resources; filling critical gaps with funds that do not supplant funds from other sources; and strategies for leveraging new money from federal and, in some cases, private sources. Deploying resources relies on the other steps in strategic planning.

Evaluation and Quality Improvement Process

An evaluation designed from the beginning of the planning process can do more than measure the ultimate effect of the initiative. In addition, it can indicate what is working and what is not, with enough time to fix or capitalize on it. A quality improvement-focused evaluation works well with a results accountability framework and supports an iterative improvement process.

Conclusion

SECCS is designed to build integrated, comprehensive early childhood service systems. Grantees' planning should be iterative, informed by evaluation, and involve the broad and deep partnerships needed to enact important strategies. Common vision, mission and principles will help bind partners through their common outcomes.

Ericka Tullis, MPP *Ericka Tullis, MPP is an evaluation coordinator at the Center for Excellence in Early Childhood Development at California State University Channel Islands.* ***Carol Sutherland, PhD, MPH*** *is executive director of the Center for Excellence in Early Childhood Development at California State University Channel Islands.* ***Kimberly Uyeda, MD, MPH*** *is director of Medical Services for the Los Angeles Unified School District and an assistant professor of pediatrics at UCLA.* ***Neal Halfon, MD, MPH*** *is director of the UCLA Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities and professor of pediatrics, public health, and policy studies at the UCLA Schools of Medicine, Public Health, and Public Policy and Social Welfare.*

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